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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VATICAN 001436

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DEPT. FOR EUR/WE (VAN CLEVE), WHA/CCA, WHA/CAN (NIGRO),
DRL/IRF

FROM EMBASSY VATICAN/MESSAGE NO. 41/OL

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT/PARA NUM 11)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/11

TAGS: PHUM PREL KIRF CU PREL KIRF CU PREL KIRF CU
SUBJECT: CARITAS INTERNATIONAL ON CUBA - "CAUTIOUS
OPTIMISM"

REF: HAVANA 00506

CLASSIFIED BY A/DCM GEORGE H. FROWICK, REASONS 1.5 (B),
(D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: EMBASSY OFFICERS MET 2/7 WITH VATICAN NGO "CARITAS INTERNATIONAL" CUBA SPECIALISTS FOR A CONVERSATION ON CARITAS' HUMANITARIAN WORK IN CUBA. THE OFFICIALS WERE CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY AND THE ROLE THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. THEY CLAIMED CARITAS CUBA ENJOYED A REASONABLE DEGREE OF FREEDOM AND MAINTAINED A COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT. THEY CHALLENGED THE USG TO "ENGAGE" WITH THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT INSTEAD OF ISOLATING IT WITH INEFFECTIVE EMBARGO. THEY FORESAW A USEFUL ROLE FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE US IN CUBA'S FUTURE SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND URGED THE USG TO PLAN NOW FOR THE POST-CASTRO ERA. END SUMMARY.

ABOVE POLITICS - JUST MEETING A HUMANITARIAN NEED

12. (C) EMBASSY OFFICERS MET MARCH 7 WITH CARITAS INTERNATIONAL CUBA SPECIALIST, FATHER NELSON VIOLA (AN ARGENTINE NATIONAL) AND CARITAS CARIBBEAN DESK OFFICER EBER FERRER (BRAZILIAN). THEY DISMISSED REFTEL REPORT THAT THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT MIGHT STEP UP PRESSURE ON THEM BECAUSE OF CONFIDENTIAL

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THE NEW U.S. ADMINISTRATION'S INITIATIVE FOR FAITH RELIEF AGENCIES. AFTER INSISTING THAT CARITAS WAS NOT "POLITICAL" AND ONLY MET A HUMANITARIAN NEED, THEY OFFERED THEIR CANDID APPRAISAL OF THE SITUATION IN CUBA. BOTH MEN NOTED HIGH STANDARDS OF INTELLECTUAL, CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG CUBANS. HOWEVER, THEY LAMENTED POOR INFRASTRUCTURE, EXCESSIVE STATE CONTROL OF THE ECONOMY, AND HARD-LINE ATTITUDES WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT THAT IMPEDED DEVELOPMENT. VIOLA CLAIMED CUBA'S MARKET ECONOMY IS SLOWLY DEVELOPING IN BOTH THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS, AND THAT THE OVERALL ECONOMY IS BETTER BECAUSE OF TOURISM AND THE INFUX OF HARD CURRENCY REMITTANCES. HE SAID THE GENERAL POPULATION HAD LESS FEAR OF THE STATE AND THAT PLURALISM HAD BEGUN TO TAKE HOLD.

13. (C) THEY BOTH CALLED THE U.S. EMBARGO AN ANACHRONISM THAT WAS STILL MANIPULATED BY FIDEL CASTRO AS AN EXCUSE FOR CUBA'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL WOES. FR. VIOLA OPINED THAT CARITAS WOULD HAVE LESS WORK TO DO IN CUBA IF THE U.S. EMBARGO WERE LIFTED, ALTHOUGH THE CHURCH'S OPPOSITION TO IT WAS PRACTICAL, NOT POLITICAL. HE SAID IT WAS UNDERSTANDABLE DURING THE COLD WAR, IF NOT JUSTIFIED, BUT THAT NOW THE U.S. IS JUST LOSING BUSINESS TO EUROPEAN COMPETITORS.

14. (C) VIOLA SAID CARITAS FUNNELS MOST OF ITS ASSISTANCE THROUGH OFFICIAL CUBAN MECHANISMS. IN ADDITION, ALTHOUGH CUBAN OFFICIALS CLAIM THAT THERE IS NO HUNGER IN THE COUNTRY, CARITAS DISCREETLY RUNS "SOUP KITCHENS," FOR THE ELDERLY AND UNMARRIED MOTHERS. THE GOC DISCOURAGES RELIEF THAT DOES NOT CONFORM TO THE SOCIALIST MODEL (WHICH WOULD CONFIDENTIAL

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PROVIDE EQUAL ACCESS TO FOOD FOR ALL), BUT TOLERATES THESE CARITAS ENTERPRISES. VIOLA SAID THAT OFTEN THE SOUP KITCHENS OPERATE FROM THE RESIDENCE OF A LOCAL CLERGYMAN WHO CLOAKS IT AS A GESTURE OF HOSPITALITY TO ALLAY OFFICIAL SUSPICIONS.

SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IMPROVED

15. (C) FATHER VIOLA CLAIMS THAT IT HAS TAKEN CUBANS 40 YEARS TO WAKE UP TO CASTRO'S TWO MAIN ERRORS: HIS ANTI-

AMERICAN POLICY AND HIS PROMOTION OF AN ATHEISTIC COMMUNISM. VIOLA CLAIMS THAT PUBLIC MANIFESTATION OF RELIGION IS BECOMING MORE ACCEPTABLE AND THAT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH HAS A GROWING INFLUENCE ON CUBAN SOCIETY. ATTENDING CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS SERVICES NO LONGER LEADS INEVITABLY TO SECOND-CLASS CITIZENSHIP -- EVEN SOME COMMUNIST PARTY MEMBERS ARE NOW OPENLY CATHOLIC. THE DIALOGUE THAT BEGAN BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE GOC IN RESPONSE TO THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AFTER THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL CONTINUES TODAY. CARITAS CUBA HAS GROWN FROM A SMALL HAVANA-BASED BRANCH TO A PRESENCE IN EVERY PARISH IN 2001. FATHER VIOLA DISMISSED CLAIMS THAT THE 1999 PAPAL VISIT HAD COME TO NOTHING IN THE END. HE SAID MANY CHRISTIANS EXPECTED TOO MUCH AT ONCE. CHANGE, HE OPINED, TAKES A LONG TIME AND IT WAS AN ABSURDITY TO EXPECT ANYTHING ELSE. THE PAPAL VISIT WAS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE.

16. (C) VIOLA CLAIMED THAT CATHOLICISM AND OPENNESS TO

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	SMEC-00	DODE-00	SRPP-00	DS-00	EB-00	EUR-00	FBIE-00
	VC-00	H-01	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	LAB-01	L-00
	VCE-00	AC-01	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OIC-02	OMB-01	OPIC-01
	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SCT-00	SP-00
	IRM-00	SS-00	STR-00	TRSE-00	T-00	USIE-00	SNIS-00
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OTHER CULTURES ERE "CUBAN TRAITS." HE SPOKE OF AN INTERPENETRAION AND DIALECTIC BETWEEN OLDER AND YOUNGER BELIVERS. DESCRIBING MARXISM AS AN INTELLECTUAL ABERATION, VIOLA SAID THAT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH WAS CETRAL TO THE INTELLECTUAL AWAKENING OF THE CUBAN POPLE. HE ATTRIBUTED OPPOSITION TO RELIGION AND O THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TO A "NATURAL SOCIOLOGICALAND PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTION" DURING THE REVOLUTIOARY PERIOD. ACCORDING TO VIOLA, THE CATHOLIC CHRCH HAS RECEIVED HAVANA'S APPROVAL TO OPEN A THIR SEMINARY TO TRAIN FUTURE CLERGY (THERE ARE ALREDY TWO IN OPERATION) AND THAT CUBA'S BISHOPS ARE FEE TO TRAVEL OUTSIDE OF THE COUNTRY. THE CHURCHIS CONTENT WITH, BT MONITORING CUBA'S SECULAR EUcation SYSTEM TO GUARD AGAINST THE TEACHING OF ATI-CHRISTIAN THEMES. THE CHURCH STILL SEEKS THE REEDOM TO CONDUCT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, BUT AS YE HAS NEITHER THE PERMISSION NOR THE FINANCIAL CAACITY TO ESTABLISH A SEPARATE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

17. (C) THE PRIEST ALSO CLAIMED THAT CUBAN AUTHOITIES HAVE NO PROBLEM ABOUT USG FUNDS REACHING IS CITIZENS THROUGH DONATIONS TO CARITAS CUBA FRO ITS SISTER AGENCY IN THE U.S., CATHOLIC RELIEF ERVICES. HE SAID CARITAS CUBA IS THE ONLY FOREIN NGO REGISTERED BY THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT. AS AN AM OF THE CUBAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE, CARITA IS IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE THAT FORCES TE CUBAN GOVERNMENT TO WORK DIRECTLY WITH THE CHUCH, SOMETHING THAT GIVES CARITAS "COVER" ACCORDING TO VIOLA.

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18. (C) VIOLA SUGGESTED THAT THE CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF MIAMI COULD BECOME A KIND OF CARIBBEAN CENTER FOR HUMANITARIAN AID OPERATIONS. ACCORDING TO VIOLA, THIS DOVETAILS WITH THE VATICAN'S "SINGLE AMERICAN CONTINENT" POLICY, BUT IT ALSO MAKES SENSE FOR CULTURAL, FINANCIAL, LOGISTICAL AND COMMUNICATIONS REASONS. HE BELIEVED THE U.S. HAD A KEY ROLE TO PLAY IN THAT THE COORDINATION CENTER MIGHT OPERATE ON A DEMOCRATIC MODEL. ITS WORK WOULD HAVE TO BE VERY DISCRETE AND ABOVE POLITICAL ISSUE. HE SAID THE ARCHDIOCESE WAS ALREADY WORKING WITH YOUNG CUBAN-AMERICANS TO CHANGE ATTITUDES AND OSTER RECONCILIATION. FATHER VIOLA MENTIONED MIAMI ASSISTANT BISHOP THOMAS G. WENSKI WAS A KEY FIGURE FOR U.S. CATHOLIC CHURCH EFFORTS IN CUBA AND THE CARIBBEAN REGION.

19. (C) FATHER VIOLA ALSO ENTHUSED OVER A MEDICAL PROJECT IN THE DIOCESE OF SANTA CLARA. SUPPORTED BY THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT AND AT ONE STAGE TO HAVE BEEN FUNDED BY A U.S. FOUNDATION, THE JOHN PAUL II PEDIATRIC CARDIOLOGY INSTITUTE OWNED AND MANAGED BY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH WAS TO BE A CATCHMENT HOSPITAL FOR ALL OF LATIN AMERICA, AND COULD "SERVE EVERYONE'S INTERESTS." APPARENTLY A FUNDING HICCUP HAS STALLED IT. VIOLA PROFFERED THE HOSPITAL AS A PROJECT IN WHICH THE U.S. COULD BECOME INVOLVED, PERHAPS THROUGH THE MEDIATION OF THE MIAMI ARCHDIOCESE, AND SO ENGAGE THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT. HE SAID CUBA WAS RIPE FOR CHANGE AND A

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PROJECT SUCH AS THIS COULD HELP STIMULATE POSITIVE CHANGE. ACCORDING TO VIOLA, U.S. ASSISTANCE IN THE PROJECT WOULD ALSO POSITIVELY AFFECT OUR INTERNATIONAL IMAGE, DAMAGED BY THE EMBARGO.

APRES CASTRO LE DELUGE?

10. (C) FATHER VIOLA URGED THE USG TO PLAN NOW FOR A POST-CASTRO TRANSITION, AT THE SAME TIME INSISTING THAT SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CHANGE WOULD HAVE GREATEST SUCCESS WHILE CASTRO WAS STILL ALIVE. HE SAID THE ATMOSPHERE IN CUBA WAS TENSE, AND THAT THERE WAS A RISK OF VIOLENCE WITH THE TRANSITION FROM AUTHORITARIANISM TO A MORE LIBERAL CLIMATE. THIS WAS AGGRAVATED BY VOCIFEROUS HARD-LINERS ON ALL SIDES.

COMMENT

10. (C) CLEARLY VIOLA WAS CONFIDENT ABOUT THE CHURCH'S FUTURE IN CUBA. HE EXPLAINED HIS UNVARNISHED CRITICISM OF USG POLICY BY SAYING "I ASK A LOT OF HAVANA, BUT I HAVE A RIGHT TO ASK EVEN MORE OF YOU." ALTHOUGH THIS INITIAL MEETING WITH A/DCM WAS A RECITATION OF RAMBLING ANALYSES, SHIBBOLETHS, AND PLATITUDES, WE BELIEVE VIOLA CAN BE AN IMPORTANT LENS INTO CUBAN AFFAIRS SINCE HE TRAVELS REGULARLY THROUGHOUT CUBA AND APPEARS WILLING TO SHARE HIS

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INFO	LOG-00	COR-01	NP-00	AID-00	AMAD-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00
	SMEC-00	DODE-00	SRPP-00	DS-00	EB-00	EUR-00	FBIE-00
	VC-00	H-01	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	LAB-01	L-00
	VCE-00	AC-01	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OIC-02	OMB-01	OPIC-01
	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SCT-00	SP-00
	IRM-00	SS-00	STR-00	TRSE-00	T-00	USIE-00	SNIS-00
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EXPERIENCES. WE WILL CONTINUE TO TALK TO HIM.
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